

FISH & WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: April 10, 2014

Agenda Item: Region 6 Bighorn Sheep/Domestic Sheep Commingling Management Area

Division: Wildlife

Action Needed: Final

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 5 minutes

Background

Region 6 has bighorn populations in the Missouri River Breaks in hunting districts 622 and 680, and also a small bighorn sheep population in the Little Rockies (HD 620), an island mountain range close to the Missouri River Breaks. On a larger scale Montana is currently home to approximately 5000 bighorn sheep. Locally and statewide, management of the species can be challenging with issues ranging from limited habitat to highway mortality to disease and small population sizes. One management strategy is wide separation between bighorn sheep and domestic sheep and goats. In Region 6 there have been several instances where bighorn sheep, typically young rams, have wandered outside of defined bighorn sheep habitat within the vicinity of domestic sheep herds. To minimize commingling and potential disease transmission and breeding between bighorn and domestic sheep, FWP is proposing to establish a Region 6 "commingling management area" which would encompass land well outside bighorn sheep habitat. Bighorns that wander into this area could be dispatched by FWP to prevent the possibility of commingling. This management area would be all Region 6 lands outside the Rocky Boy, Fort Belknap and Fort Peck Indian Reservations as well as those lands outside bighorn sheep HD 680 and deer/elk HDs 621, 622, 631 and 632, with the exception of bighorn sheep habitat adjacent to the Rocky Boy Indian Reservation. The bighorn sheep habitat adjacent to the Rocky Boy Indian Reservation excluded from the management area includes the following sections: Sections 1, 2, 11, 12, 13, 14, 23, 24, 25, and 26 in Township 28N Range 14E; Sections 7, 8, 17, 18, 19, 20, 29, and 30 in Township 28N Range 15E; Sections 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 34, 35, and Section 36 in Township 29N Range 14E. In unique circumstances, FWP may authorize a landowner to dispatch a bighorn sheep in this area when FWP isn't able to immediately respond. Based on experience, only small numbers of bighorn sheep in isolated circumstances would be lethally removed.

Public Involvement Process & Results

Public comment opportunity will run through 5 p.m., Monday, May 19. At the time of this writing, twelve comments were received. In response to Tribal opposition, FWP has clarified the exclusion of reservation lands and adjacent bighorn habitat from this management area. Any final adoption will take place at the May 22 Commission meeting.

Alternatives and Analysis

Alternatives include continuing to rely on a kill permit for taking bighorn sheep in this area. However, the time getting such approval risks "losing" the wild sheep before it returns to other bighorns.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale

FWP recommends the Commission endorse the Region 6 Bighorn Sheep/Domestic Sheep Commingling Management Area to clearly communicate FWP intent and authority to dispatch bighorn sheep in this area to reduce the possibility of commingling between bighorns and domestic sheep.

Proposed Motion

I move the Commission approve as final the Region 6 Bighorn Sheep/Domestic Sheep Commingling Management Area as presented by FWP.